

UNIT 13

NATIONALISM AND THE EXPLOSION OF ROMANTIC OPERA

FIGURES

Adolphe Adam
(1803-1856)

Giacomo Meyerbeer
(1791-1864)

Carl Maria von Weber
(1786-1826)

Gioachino Rossini
(1792-1868)

Gaetano Donizetti
(1797-1848)

Vincenzo Bellini
(1801-1835)

Giuseppe Verdi
(1813-1901)

Giacomo Puccini
(1858-1924)

Georges Bizet
(1838-1875)

Sir Walter Scott
(1771-1832)

***Giuseppe Garibaldi**
(1807-1882)

Otto von Bismark
(1815-1898)

PLACES

Each “Place” in this unit is home to a famous opera house. Take time to visit the website of a few (or all!) of the following:

Paris:	http://www.operadeparis.fr/cns11/live/onp/site/
Venice:	http://www.teatrolafenice.it/
Dresden:	http://www.semperoper.de/en/oper/welcome.html
Hamburg:	http://www.hamburgische-staatsoper.de/0_english/2_state_opera/frameset_state_opera.php
Milan:	http://www.teatroallascala.org/en/index.html
Prague:	http://www.czechopera.cz/index.php?akce=theatres&kod_sceny=2
Sydney:	http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/
Vienna:	http://www.wiener-staatsoper.at/Content.Node2/home/eninfo/2172.php

VOCABULARY

Minuet

An early type of social dance (18th century) requiring the dancing couple to make physical, hand-to-hand, contact with one another. It has a triple meter, i.e. three beats per measure: 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Eventually, minuets became so common that many composers wrote pieces in the style of a minuet just for listening rather than for dancing.

Waltz

A later social dance that became popular in the late 18th century. It dominated the 19th century. The waltz was characterized by triple meter and the robust waltz *rhythm* found its way into many pieces of music in the 19th century, from operas to symphonies. Waltzing required more physical intimacy than the minuet, and was considered scandalous by some. Its high speed required the dancing couple to wrap their arms around each other and to lock eyes, in order not to become dizzy.

Ballet

From the Italian verb *ballare*, which means “to dance.” By the 19th century, ballet had become a highly disciplined, formal style of dancing intended for staged performance. Although most ballet performances now focus entirely on the dance, ballet first appeared as *intermezzi* between the acts of an opera or play. Ballet grew from Court Dancing. Dancing on the toe (for women), or *en pointe* developed about 1830. Ballet in the 1830s and 1840s goes by the name Romantic Ballet. After the middle of the 19th century, an even more elaborate vocabulary of *en pointe* dancing

became known as Classical Ballet. The Russians and the Danish became great masters of Classical Ballet.

Singspiel (*singen*=to sing) + (*spielen*=to play)

Singspiel is a form of dialogue opera, in which the arias (songs) are sung, while the information and dialogue (or conversation) is spoken. Unlike Italian opera, in which all of the story is sung throughout, whether in recitative or aria, the Germans found that their language worked best in opera if the dialogue were set in normal speech, and the emotional parts (arias) were sung.

French Grand Opera

This style of opera was uniquely French in its grandeur. French “grand” operas were epic performances usually based upon sweeping and complex historical subjects. They always had five acts and tackled serious historical topics. They included at least one ballet (dance episode) and had big scenes for chorus. As a result, these beautiful and fascinating productions were (and are) incredibly expensive—one main reason these works are rarely performed. An example of French Grand Opera would be Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*.

Bel canto (*bel*=beautiful) + (*canto*=singing)

Although all opera is intended to be “sung beautifully,” *bel canto* describes a specific kind of singing technique, going all the way back to the 1600s. The term also refers to a type of operatic role in the 1700s and 1800s that emphasizes expression of the voice and ornate vocal melodies. *Bel canto* opera relies on a direct emotional appeal, rather than “grand” costumes, elaborate decorations, or historical weight. *Bel canto* opera can be serious or comic. An example of a comic *bel canto* opera would be Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*, while a tragic one would be Bellini’s *Norma*.

Risorgimento

Il Risorgimento (in Italian, *the Resurgence*) was the socio-political movement that led to the unification of the independent Italian states into one united nation called Italy. This long-overdue movement began during the end of Napoleon’s rule and was concluded by 1871 (coinciding with the end of the Franco-Prussian War).

Verismo

A “realistic” approach to theater, including opera. *Verismo* opera is usually dark and tragic. Although the composer Puccini is most often credited with writing the finest *verismo* operas (*Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly*), Verdi decades earlier was incorporating quite a bit of realism, especially in his operas with tragic endings (*La Traviata*).

DATES

- 1815-1871: Italian *Risorgimento*
- 1821:** **Weber's *Der Freischütz* has its premiere.**
- 1831:** ***En pointe* dancing steals the show in Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*.**
- 1852: Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
- 1853:** ***La Traviata* is premiered in Venice.**
- 1854: Crimean War
- Kansas-Nebraska Act
- 1860: South Carolina becomes first state to secede from the Union.
- 1861: Italy is unified as one nation.
- Serfdom abolished in Russia.
- 1861-1865: The American Civil War
- 1870-1871: The Franco-Prussian War
- 1871: Germany is unified as one nation.
- The Suez Canal is completed.
- Verdi's *Aida* is premiered in Cairo, Egypt.**
- 1876:** Invention of the telephone
- Battle of the Little Bighorn
- First performance of Wagner's *Ring* in the *Festspielhaus* [see Unit 14]**
- 1877:** **Invention of the gramophone**

LISTENING

- Puccini** “Nessun dorma,” *Turandot* (premiere 1926, left unfinished at composer’s death in 1924)
- Bizet** Habañera, *Carmen* (1875)

SELECTED VIEWING OF OPERAS AND BALLETS ON DVD

Puccini - *Turandot at the Forbidden City of Beijing*, conducted by Zubin Mehta. Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (1998)

A remarkable documentary, this DVD shows the construction of a production of *Turandot* at the great opera house of La Scala in Italy. It then was taken to the Forbidden City in China. A splendid way for the whole family to see how an opera is produced, and to marvel at the resources China contributed to the production. The costumes and sets are blindingly beautiful. And there are interviews with the singers, directors, even officials involved in the delicate matter of transporting an Italian theatrical production to China.

Verdi. *Otello*. Directed by Franco Zeffereilli. Teatro la Scala. Plácido Domingo and Katia Ricciarelli (1986)

This attractive *movie* version of *Otello* is smartly done, with wonderful sets, realistic acting, and the fantastic voices of Plácido Domingo and Katia Ricciarelli. In addition to being impressive as a film, it will provide an excellent basis for a comparison with Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Verdi. *La Traviata*. Directed by Franco Zeffereilli. The Metropolitan Opera, conducted by James Levine. Plácido Domingo, Theresa Stratas (1983).

This heart-breaker is well done as a movie, with lovely sets. The opera is performed straight through (with subtitles, of course), and the movie-like aspect of it will capture the attention of those new to opera.

Adam. *Giselle*. Natalia Markarova, Mkhail Baryshnikov, American Ballet Theater (1992)

There are literally dozens of performances of *Giselle* available on DVD. This performance with Baryshnikov and Markarova is a classic—but you should try *several* productions for comparisons! Try any Russian production, especially the Kirov Ballet (Leningrad/St. Petersburg), or the 2008 production by the National Ballet of Paris, National Orchestra of Paris, 2008. There is an older performance that features legendary dancer Rudolph Nureyev, and while the video quality may not be as “modern,” the dancing is phenomenal.

Bizet. *Carmen*. Directed by Carlos Saura with Antonio Gades (1983) Flamenco-Film Version.

A fascinating way to look at *Carmen*, featuring the virtuoso dancing of Antonio Gades. Saura has created a story-within-a-story, in which a group of professional flamenco dancers are preparing a flamenco production of *Carmen*. Suddenly, a Carmen-like situation develops within the company. The principal parts of the opera are all heard, and the flamenco dancing is magnificent. Plus, you'll get an idea of how a dance production is rehearsed. There are gripping scenes, and viewers are likely to be entranced. Also, you can discuss how a story-within-a-story drama works. (There's a long tradition of this dramatic structure—start with a familiar one such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*)

WEBSITES

<http://classical-music-opera.com/>

A wonderful classical music website; although the website focuses on opera, other links lead to information on concerti, masses, sonatas, and symphonies.

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Giacomo_Meyerbeer/24631.htm

The official Naxos site on Meyerbeer, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:

<http://www.meyerbeer.com/whois.htm>

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Carl_Maria_von_Weber/22404.htm

The official Naxos site on von Weber, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:

<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/weber.html>

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Gioachino_Rossini/26313.htm

The official Naxos website on Rossini, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio files. Also view:

<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/rossini.html>

<http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/rossini.php>

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Gaetano_Donizetti/26004.htm

The official Naxos site on Donizetti, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio files. Also view:

<http://www.donizettisociety.com/donizettilife.htm>

<http://www.donizettisociety.com/>

This website provides information on Donizetti as well as a wide variety of people and artistic influences that were part of his era.

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Vincenzo_Bellini/25979.htm

The official Naxos site on Bellini, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:

<http://www.humanitiesweb.org/human.php?s=c&p=c&a=b&ID=113>

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Giuseppe_Verdi/21135.htm

The official Naxos site on Verdi, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:

<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/verdi.html>

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Giacomo_Puccini/20991.htm

The official Naxos site on Puccini, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:

<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/puccini.html>

<http://www.puccini.com/>

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Georges_Bizet/25998.htm

The official Naxos site on Bizet, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:

<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/bizet.html>

<http://www.humanitiesweb.org/human.php?s=c&p=a&a=i&ID=743>

http://www.online-literature.com/walter_scott/

A guide to the life and works of Sir Walter Scott, including quizzes on some of his most popular works. Also view:

<http://www.lucidcafe.com/library/95aug/scott.html>

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

1. Find a video or DVD copy of at least one of the operas on your listening list. Before you sit down to watch, spend some time at the composer's websites becoming familiar with the libretto and the background of the work and try to answer at least some of the following questions:

- In what year was this opera composed?
- How old was the composer in that year, and what was going on in his life?
- Is the opera set in the composer's home country? If not, why was the setting appropriate for the story?
- Was the story from a Biblical or literary source?
- How is this video production conceived? Is it like a stage production, a movie version, or a documentary? What do you find most engaging about this particular production?

Make sure you set the DVD to show English subtitles of what is being sung.

2. If there is an opera company in your city or area, set up a field trip to view its rehearsal facilities. Most companies (even small ones) have a public relations liaison, who will be happy to show you around and tell you or your group about their work. Here are some questions to get you started:

- How long is the company's "season," and how many productions are performed?
- Who decides which productions to perform?
- What is the budget for the entire season? For each production?
- Do they own the productions, or do they rent them (sets, costumes, etc.)
- How far in advance do they decide on the productions, and book the singers?
- How old is this company? Has it changed over the years?
- What are the present goals of this company?
- What factors (economic, geographic, civic, artistic) are helping to shape the company's future?

3. Take time to visit the website of each opera house listed in the "Places" section. These gorgeous buildings have equally gorgeous websites, so this will be a real pleasure! (If you need a little help with the foreign languages, look for the English translation button as necessary.) In fact, most of the world's great opera houses have their own websites that provide a wealth of information on what goes on "behind the curtain." For each opera house, try to answer the following:

- In what year was the house built?

- Has it ever been destroyed and/or needed to be rebuilt? Remember: most of these buildings have existed through two World Wars, plus at least one national revolution!
 - Does the house offer tours?
 - How often do they offer performances?
 - What is the price range for seating?
 - Does the house offer “standing” places? Long lines of students and tourists almost always form, full of people willing to wait in line for hours just to stand through a full-length opera!
 - Does the opera have any corporate sponsors?
 - Do any non-opera groups use the house as well?
4. Research the premieres of those operas listed in the “Dates” section. (The *premiere* is a work’s very first public performance). How well were the works liked? Why were the works commissioned? Who were the librettists?

VIEWING GUIDE

1. Western ballet goes back to the court of _____. The biggest social-dance craze of the 18th century was the _____. Then, in the late 18th century, the _____ became popular, and it was more physically intimate and athletic.
2. The word “ballet” comes from the Italian verb *ballare*, meaning _____.
3. About 1800, the German composer _____ wrote the first musical score specifically designed for a ballet.
4. Ballet from the first half of the 19th century is known (stylistically) as _____, while ballet from the second half is known as _____. This is worth noting, because in music, the _____ style *precedes* the _____ period.
5. Dancing *en pointe* was initially intended to depict _____

_____.

6. The first act of *Giselle* is based in the 18th-century (literary) world of _____, while the spooky second act is in the world of the _____. The female spirits wanting to gain revenge are called the _____.

7. *Giselle* also had a _____ scene where the main character dances herself to death. This kind of scene became popular in the 19th century. There's an especially good one in Donizetti's opera _____, based on a novel by the popular English writer _____.

8. A last point about *Giselle*: Adam uses themes called _____ to signify characters or objects. This will become common practice in 19th-century music.

9. The (nationality) _____ greatly preferred to have much dancing in their (what kind?) _____ operas. They also liked visually extravagant scenes such as _____

_____.

10. An important theme in 19th-century opera is _____. Another "spiritual" theme important, particularly in German opera, is _____.

11. German opera was changed forever in (date) _____ with a *Singspiel* called *Der Freischütz*, or "The Free Shot." This opera was especially popular with German audiences because _____

_____.

12. Germany did not become a united country until after the _____ in _____ (date). Italy did not become united until _____ (date).

13. In America, we also like the *Singspiel* format, but we don't usually call it "opera." Rather, we call it a _____.

14. What is the difference between an “ordinary” opera and a *Singspiel*, or “dialogue” opera? _____

15. Do 19th-century operas depend upon a *lieto fine*? _____

16. Who were the three greatest Italian opera composers in the first half of the nineteenth century (their names end in “i” ☺)?

17. *Bel canto* means literally _____

18. Rossini excelled at many things, including writing excellent opening numbers called _____ and weaving the music and action of several characters together, in what we call _____.

19. Verdi’s opera *Nabucco* tells the Biblical story of _____. The famous chorus called _____ is familiar to nearly every Italian, even today.

20. What is a *scena ed aria*? _____

21. What was the *Risorgimento*? _____

22. *Viva Verdi* became a code for what revolutionary cry?

_____. Why was it necessary to put this seemingly innocent phrase into a code? _____

23. What culture seemed especially exotic to the French?_____.

24. Bizet's opera *Carmen* broke new ground because of the way it ended, namely _____. That kind of "realism" has a name in theater: _____.

25. Radio broadcasts of _____, sponsored for decades by _____, were long a great source for listening to opera for people living outside of big cities.